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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000520

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DRL/CRA, INR/NESA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: Sri Lanka: Level of violence falls markedly compared to past campaigns

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 231158Z Mar 04

- (B) Colombo 515, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The level of campaign-related violence in Sri Lanka has fallen markedly compared to that recorded in the past. It is not clear why violence is down, but the Elections Commission, the police, and local and foreign monitors have worked hard to tamp down the violence. That said, with just over one week to go before the April 2 parliamentary election, violence could still surge, and, based on past patterns, post-election violence could be a problem, too. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) RELATIVELY CALM CAMPAIGN (SO FAR): The level of campaign-related violence this election cycle has fallen markedly compared to that recorded in the past. (Sri Lanka holds parliamentary elections on April 2.) Thus far, for example, there have been three killings linked to the current campaign whereas at a similar point in the 2001 parliamentary election campaign there were roughly 20 killings. Of the three killings, two of them have been linked to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the other was apparently related to violence between Muslim parties (see Reftels). All three of the killings occurred in the Eastern Province. At this point, unless there is a sudden spike in the violence, it seems unlikely that the number of campaign-related killings this time around will approach that of previous campaigns. (There were over 50 killings during the 2001 parliamentary election campaign, roughly 25 in the 2000 parliamentary election campaign, and roughly 50 during the 1999 presidential election campaign.)

13. (SBU) Although the amount of killings has gone down sharply, there have still been many violent incidents related to the campaign. According to PAFFREL, a local election monitoring group, there have been 156 incidents of violence so far in the race. (PAFFREL stands for "People's Alliance for Free and Fair Elections.") The Center for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV), another NGO, reports that there have been over 800 cases of violence. (CMEV uses a substantially more flexible method of calculating violence compared with PAFFREL. FYI: As they have in past campaigns, both CMEV and PAFFREL are receiving funding assistance from the USG.) Based on the PAFFREL and CMEV figures, the incidents appear relatively evenly spread among all of the parties, with each being accused of instigating a share of the violence. Overall, the number of violent incidents during this campaign is down compared to 2001, too. In 2001, at an equivalent stage in the campaign, for example, CMEV said there had been over 1,700 violent incidents.

14. (C) REASONS FOR DROP-OFF UNCLEAR: The precise reasons for the sharp drop-off in violence are unclear. Going into the current campaign, most observers thought it would be a very violent affair due to the deep cohabitation tensions between President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, but that has not been the case, thus far. The following reasons have been cited to explain the situation:

-- As reviewed in Reftels, the Elections Commission (EC) has taken an activist approach during this campaign. The EC has required the police to enforce rules banning election paraphernalia such as posters and banners, etc. Most observers believe that the EC's actions have helped lower the temperature of the campaign and thus helped reduce violence.

-- The police have been out and about enforcing election rules and arresting those accused of violence. In addition, there were not many police "transfers" made just before the campaign. (In past campaigns, police who were favorable to the government in power were sent to places seen as sensitive for the election. In these positions, the transferred officers often favored the

governing party over the opposition in local disputes, thus contributing to the general lawlessness.)

-- Local and international observers have been quite active. PAFFREL and CMEV, for example, have wide networks of informants and they actively report evidence of violence to the police. In the meantime, the European Union, the Commonwealth, and Japan, etc., have sent in large teams of observers that are fanning out across the country. The increased presence of local and international observers seems to be having an impact on the violence.

-- Another theory that has been advanced as to the decline in the violence is that the main parties are evenly balanced in terms of controlling levers of power during this campaign cycle. In the campaigns of 1999, 2000, and 2001, for example, the then-People's Alliance (PA) government was in total control. This time around, with cohabitation between a PA president and a United National Party prime minister, each side has influence in the government, which prevents either side from taking full advantage of the other.

15. (C) COMMENT: Sri Lanka is not out of the woods just yet. There is over a week to go in the campaign and violence could still surge in the next several days and on election day itself. (As has been the case in the past, the GSL is expected to enforce a curfew the night of the election and perhaps on subsequent nights depending on the situation.) This is especially true because the race seems competitive among all of the major parties at this stage. Moreover, based on past patterns, post-election violence could be a problem as thugs affiliated with the winning side attack the losing side. All that said, as of this point, Sri Lanka appears to have cleaned up its act to a large extent compared to the all-out bloody nature of past campaigns. END COMMENT.

16. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD